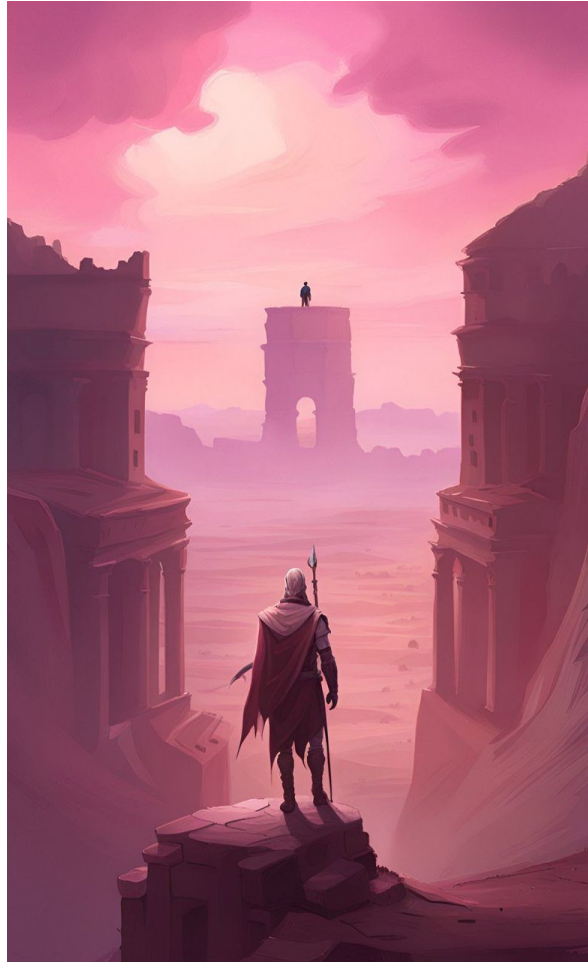


Lightning rumbles with a deafening roar, and the winds swirl with immense speed, covering the surface with sand. The sky lights up with each crack of lightning, but it is not our sky; it is a deep pink hue that brightens with every strike. Amidst the chaos, Ahnaf awakens. He looks around, trying to make sense of his surroundings.

Around him lie the broken structures of lost civilizations—some European, some Greek, some Asian. There are buildings, temples, small houses, massive skyscrapers, and towers. Some structures are thousands of years old, while others appear as if they were built yesterday, and some seem to be from a distant future. Everything is scattered and out of place on a vast ocean of sand; it is a desert.

Ahnaf finds himself standing atop a broken colosseum, unlike any in our world, as it is far larger and covers a wide area.



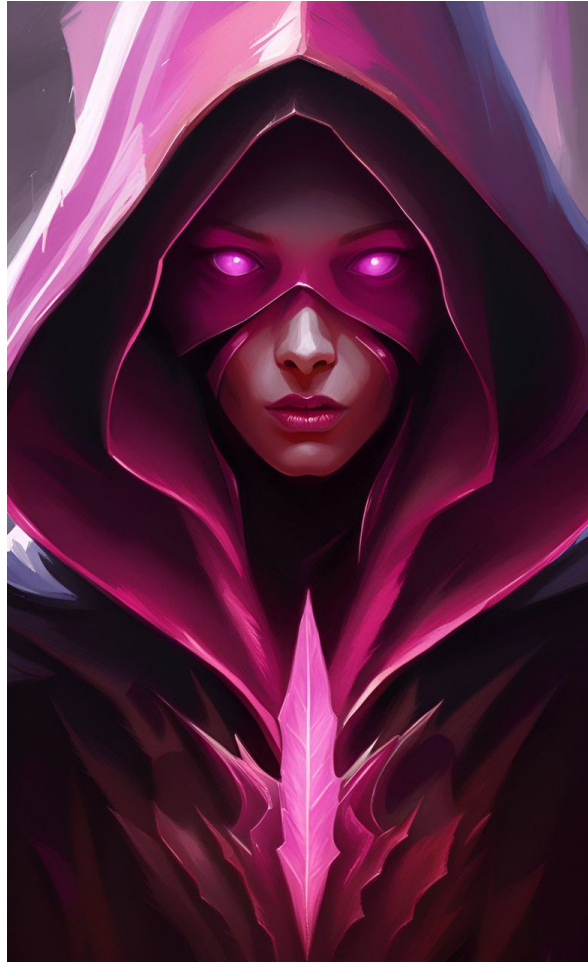
Ahnaf turns around, looking towards the center. What he sees shakes him to the core. His eyes widen in disbelief as he beholds hundreds of people circling the colosseum. Among them, he sees himself—not just one or two, but multiple versions of himself.

Some are old with long, graying beards, their faces etched with the lines of countless experiences. Others are as young as he is now, their eyes filled with the same youthful curiosity. Some versions of him are badly damaged, with wounds and scars covering their bodies, evidence of battles fought and lost. Others are so spotless,

their skin unblemished, as if they've never faced the harshness of the outside world.

There are versions of him dressed in ancient robes, reminiscent of long-lost civilizations, while others wear futuristic attire, adorned with strange, glowing symbols. Some carry weapons, swords, and shields, while others hold mysterious artifacts that seem to hum with energy.

Yet, all of them stand there, saying nothing., with the same helpless expression, staring at the center. The air is thick with tension, and Ahnaf can feel the weight of their collective gaze, each version of himself reflecting a different path, a different destiny.



Down in the center, Ahnaf sees a cloaked figure. The face is obscured by a scarf, making it impossible to discern any features. The figure looks up at the sky and raises both hands to either side, clenching halfway as tiny sparkles of pink light begin to form around its fingers. The air around the figure seems to shimmer with an otherworldly energy, casting an eerie glow on the surrounding ruins.

Suddenly, the figure stops and looks directly at Ahnaf, its eyes glowing bright pink, the same color as the sky above. The intensity of the gaze sends a shiver down Ahnaf's spine, as if the figure can

see into the depths of his soul. The pink light in its eyes pulses rhythmically, matching the crackling energy in the sky.

In that moment, something shakes the sky right above the figure. The ground trembles, and the air is filled with a palpable tension. With a deafening sound of thunder, the sky splits open, and a blinding flash of light engulfs everything. Ahnaf feels a surge of energy coursing through him, and just as quickly as it began, it ends.

Ahnaf wakes up from his sleep, his heart pounding and his mind racing. The vividness of the dream lingers, leaving him with a sense of unease and a burning curiosity about the mysterious figure and the strange world he had witnessed.



He opens his eyes as quickly as he can, breathless, the memory of that strange place vivid in his mind. It was a dream. He scans the room around him: dark blue curtains, a dimly lit ceiling light. Beside him, a woman in a white lab coat is focused on her cell phone, with various medical equipment and medicines on the shelf next to her. Ahnaf realizes he is in a hospital.

"Ahem! Miss?" Ahnaf says.

The woman quickly looks at him and yelps in surprise, "Eek!!!" She then composes herself, "Ah, Mr. Ahnaf, I didn't realize you were awake. Let me get the doctor for you."

As she turns to leave, she accidentally bumps into the shelf, causing a cascade of medical supplies to tumble down. Flustered, she tries to catch them, juggling a stethoscope, a box of bandages, and a bottle of hand sanitizer. "Oh dear, oh dear!" she mutters, her face turning red.

Ahnaf can't help but chuckle at the sight. "It's okay, really," he says, trying to reassure her.

The nurse finally manages to gather everything and, with a sheepish smile, says, "I'll be right back with the doctor. Just... try not to disappear on me, okay?"





As she leaves the room, Ahnaf tries to recall the events that led to this moment. He remembers seeing his mother at gunpoint, the anger he felt, the gunshot, and the blood pouring from his chest. Anxiously, he lifts his hospital gown, but to his surprise, there is no sign of any wound.

"Where is it!? How could this happen!? I clearly remember the blood on my hands before blacking out. Where could it have gone!?" he exclaims, bewildered.

It was 12:30 AM, and down on the ground floor, inside a small compartment, the doctor—a 52-year-old bald gentleman wearing round spectacles—could be heard talking to Ahnaf's mother, Ruvana. The room was dimly lit, casting long shadows on the walls, and the air was filled with a sense of quiet urgency. The doctor spoke in a calm, reassuring tone, trying to explain the situation to Ruvana, who listened intently, her face a mix of worry and hope.





The doctor, astonished, says, "Look, miss, I don't know how that happened, but this is not normal. I mean, a bullet wound disappearing just like that while he is unconscious in the ambulance is something that cannot be explained through medical science."

Ruvana, in a worried voice, replies, "I am as surprised as you are, Dr. Ramsey. I just don't understand how that is even humanly possible."

Dr. Ramsey, who has been the primary care physician for Ruvana and Ahnaf for the last 20 years, looks at the records in his hands. "No sign of a bullet being inside him, even the blood samples have no trace of a bullet. It's as if the bullet dissolved within his body."

Ruvana, glancing at the time, asks, "At least he is out of harm's way?"

In a quiet tone, Ramsey responds, "Look, I know everything seems absurd and quite unbelievable right now, but everything that happened was true. We need to think clearly. If word gets out, the government will be the first to get involved, and when that happens, nobody knows what they are going to do to Ahnaf."

Ruvana, worried, asks, "Then... then what do you suggest?"

Ramsey looks at her and says, "Well, the good thing is nobody aside from me saw the wound. What everybody saw was a T-shirt drenched in blood. It's a good thing I sent the nurse to call the surgeon when he was taken to the ICU with me. Otherwise, everyone else would have found out."

Ramsey leans back in his chair with relief. "Ruvana, you and Ahnaf are like family to me. The best thing you can do for him right now is to forget everything. Don't tell him that he got shot. Tell him one of the thugs in your room misfired on one of their own. I will say the same."

Impatiently, Ruvana asks, "That is all well and good, but when will he wake up?"

Ramsey sighs, "I don't know, maybe a day, a week, a mo—"

Just as he is about to finish, the nurse bursts into the room, gasping, "Dr. Ramsey!!!" She looks at Ramsey and Ruvana with wide eyes. "He's awake."



It is 1 PM in the afternoon, and Ahnaf, now wearing a new set of clothes, is getting ready to be discharged. While Ruvana is busy filling out hospital papers, Ahnaf starts roaming around the entrance, admiring the hospital. The entrance is bustling with activity, with staff members in grey and blue outfits moving in and out of the sliding doors, some assisting patients in wheelchairs. The air is filled with the hum of conversations and the occasional beep of medical equipment.

Outside, a beautiful fountain stands in the center of a circular garden, surrounded by a bed of vibrant flowers in full bloom. The gentle sound of water cascading from the fountain adds a soothing ambiance to the otherwise busy scene. The sun is shining brightly, casting a warm glow on the hospital grounds, and a gentle breeze carries the sweet scent of the flowers.

As Ahnaf scans the area, his eyes catch a familiar figure—Kelly. Her eyes widen upon noticing Ahnaf, and she starts running towards him, her face a mix of relief and worry.

Ahnaf raises his hand, "Hey Kelly! Look, I a—" but before he can finish, Kelly rushes to him, wrapping her arms tightly around his waist and hugging him with all her strength.

"Ahnaf, I was so worried!" Kelly whispers, her voice trembling with emotion. "I thought I had lost you."

Ahnaf gently strokes her hair, feeling the warmth of her embrace. "I'm here, Kelly. I'm okay,"



He reassures her, his voice soft and comforting. He can feel her heart pounding against his chest, and he holds her even tighter, not wanting to let go.

For a moment, the hustle and bustle around them fades away, and it's just the two of them, lost in each other's presence. The world outside the hospital seems distant and unimportant compared to the love and relief they feel in this moment.

Kelly, with teary eyes and her face buried deep in Ahnaf's chest, sobs, "Oh my God! Oh my God, Ahnaf! I thought that I... I thought that I had lost you!"

Ahnaf hugs her back and places his hand on her head, slowly caressing her hair. "It's okay, see... I'm fine, nothing happened to me," he reassures her, pulling her back gently and placing his hand on her cheeks to wipe away her tears.

Kelly looks at Ahnaf, her eyes filled with relief and love. She slowly starts leaning in, their faces drawing closer, when suddenly—

"OH! Look how lovely you both are, this calls for a picture!" Ruvana surprises them from behind with her cell phone in hand.





Ahnaf, flabbergasted, exclaims, "MOM! What are you—" but a flash of light from Ruvana's cell phone cuts him off.

Kelly, equally embarrassed, with her cheeks turning a deep shade of red, stammers, "Um... Hi, Ms. Sohail."

Ruvana giggles playfully, "Alright, alright, I'll stop with the teasing," she says, looking at her watch. "Oh look, it's time for lunch. How about you join us back at my house, Kelly?"



Kelly gives a slight smile and agrees. As they head to Ruvana's car, Ahnaf and Kelly exchange a shy glance, their hands brushing against each other.

In the backseat of Ruvana's sedan, Ahnaf and Kelly sit close, holding each other's hands carefully, trying to avoid Ruvana's teasing gaze. They watch together as the hospital grows distant, the world outside the window passing by in a blur.



Ruvana, glancing at them through the rearview mirror, can't help but chuckle. "You two are just adorable," she says, causing both Ahnaf and Kelly to blush even more.

Ahnaf, trying to change the subject, says, "So, Mom, what's for lunch?"

Ruvana, with a mischievous grin, replies, "Oh, just your favorite—Steak with a side of embarrassing childhood stories!"

Kelly giggles, and Ahnaf groans, "Mom, please!"

The car is filled with laughter and light-hearted banter as they drive home, the bond between them growing stronger with each passing moment.



Later that night, Ahnaf, exhausted from the day's events, lays on his bed, his mind racing with thoughts. He recalls the terrifying moment when he and his mother were held at gunpoint. The pistol fired, and he clearly saw blood spilling from his chest. Maybe he didn't feel the pain because of the adrenaline, but he knows what he saw.

Despite the continuous denial from his mother and Dr. Ramsey at the hospital, Ahnaf feels a nagging suspicion that they are hiding something from him. Their insistence that he was never shot only adds to his confusion and frustration.

Feeling hopeless and uncertain, Ahnaf tries to piece together the puzzle. He realizes that perhaps the wound itself is not the most important part of the event. Instead, the crucial questions are "Who" and "Why." Who were the men that attacked them, and why did they target his family?

As he lies there, staring at the ceiling, Ahnaf's determination grows. He knows he must uncover the truth, not just for his own peace of mind, but to protect his loved ones from any future threats. The mystery of the disappearing wound and the cloaked figure in his dream only deepen his resolve to find answers.



As he thought that, Ahnaf jolted out of bed and ran downstairs, where Ruvana was washing the dishes.

"Mom..." he exhaled in an assertive tone.

Ruvana, wiping the dishes, replied, "I know what you are going to ask." She frowned while placing them on the counter one by one.

"Look, sweetie, before you came into my life, your dad was with me. His name was Zain. He was a very nice guy once. We loved each other, we married, and he had a small business. Life was perfect. But the good times didn't last long. The year was 1998. He had dealings with some bad people; they called themselves the Heartlands. They were the local mob back then. They invested in his business, and soon after that, he started accumulating losses. And if that wasn't bad enough..."

After finishing the dishes, she turned to Ahnaf, who was now sitting at the dining table, looking at her with a concerned expression.





She sat beside Ahnaf at the dining table, her voice trembling as she began, "He started gambling and drinking. He whisked all our money away just like that. We fought day and night, and soon after, he started throwing his hands on me, beating me. We were deep in debt, and the bank was ready to take the roof off our heads. Then, the Heartlands showed up again."

Ahnaf, holding his mom's arm firmly, looked at her, eager to hear the rest of it.

Ruvana, holding Ahnaf's hand, continued, "They showed up again, offering to save us from our debt and pay off the bank, but in return, they gave us an ultimatum. Zain had to work for them, and if he died, 15 years after his death, I must return half the money."

Ahnaf, his voice filled with hope, asked, "So Dad didn't die, right? He's working for them, right?"

Ruvana frowned and shed a tear. "He died in 2005..."

Ahnaf, now worried, asked in a low voice, "How much money do you owe them?"

Ruvana replied, "50,000 pounds..."

Ahnaf, frustrated, exclaimed, "But we still have 2 years left, right? We could figure something out. Why are they doing this now?"

Ruvana placed a palm over her head. "I don't know... maybe... maybe they are desperate."

Ahnaf, his voice cautious, asked, "And what will happen next time if... if they come and we don't have the money?"

Ruvana simply stayed silent, looking blankly at the table.

Ahnaf, his anger boiling over, shouted, "DAMN IT, MOM, ANSWER ME!!!"





He bangs both his hands hard on the dining table, and the 48-inch long table made of thick maple wood breaks down from the side as if it were made of feathers. One of the sets of its legs bursts into two pieces, leaving the table at a slanted position. The force sends Ruvana tumbling backward, her eyes wide with shock as she looks at the shattered remains of the table.

Ahnaf, with eyes wide open, stares at his hands in astonishment, wondering how he could have done that to something as hard as rock. He then looks back at Ruvana, his expression filled with regret and confusion.

"Mom, I'm... I don't know what got into me... I am very sorry. I—" he stammers, his voice trembling.

Without saying anything more, he rushes back to his bedroom, slamming the door shut with a thud. Ahnaf throws himself onto his bed, tears streaming down his face. He clutches his pillow tightly, crying and feeling a deep sense of remorse for what he did. His hands, which just a day ago **couldn't even hurt a fly**.....



